CONTENT LEARNING STYLES

One of the strengths of SOI testing is determining students' ability to handle different types of learning content: how well they can process Figural, Symbolic, or seMantic data and whether they are Figural learners, Symbolic learners, or seMantic learners.

It is not an either-or proposition. A given student may be high in all three, low in all three, or any combination of the three.

We refer to these as learning styles, but, more accurately, they should be thought of as learning "propensities" because they are more malleable (through training) than the label "style" would connote.

Whenever we encounter a middle school student who is reading at second grade level, our first supposition is that he – yes, the pattern more often fits boys than girls – is a Figural learner who has never encountered a reading program that fit his learning strengths.

Inevitably, when we test non-readers third grade and above, we find that their learning profile is strongest in Figural and weakest in seMantic.

The academic prospects for a Figural learner who has not learned to read are bleak. Reading is the rite of passage into the greater part of the curriculum, and for those non-readers, it is a constant source of frustration, if not cause for withdrawal from the entire school process.

Ironically, these same students are often very verbal – indicating seMantic abilities that are being obstructed by their inability to read. For such students, more "remedial" reading instruction is not the answer. They have already been exposed, repeatedly, to reading approaches that have not worked.

These students have an immediate need; they need to be convinced that they can read. The easiest way to instill this confidence is to provide them with a Figural-based reading program. Our figural-based program is called LOCAN and is described at greater length in the *SOI Inservice Manual*.

Figural-based reading instruction is not an accommodation (a substitute for learning to read alphabetically). It is only a bridge to the experience of reading – processing written concepts. Once students have this confidence, the transition to reading (usually whole-word) can be accomplished within a reasonable amount of time.

The larger point of this rather extended example is that there is sometimes a mismatch between our expectations of learners and their propensities to learn.

We assume that students can learn to read phonetically because, in fact, almost all students do. But when students do not fulfill these expectations – when they do not learn despite good instruction – we should look for the disabling learning impediments. Those impediments are revealed as a mismatch of expectations and learning styles.

SOI has developed a program specifically to help students who are significantly behind in reading achievement. It is called *Basic Readers*. It guides the teacher through a set of initial screenings to assess the students' visual capabilities and content learning propensities.

The first goal of the program is to engage the students by teaching to their strengths then guide them – by abilities training – to the most appropriate traditional reading instruction.

Basic Reader is a "catch-up" program; it is not intended as a "starter" program. Curriculum is designed with assumptions about the abilities and skills of the students at a given level.

For the most part, these assumptions are met. It would not be an efficient use of instructional time to screen every student to insure that they meet those assumptions before they engage the curriculum.

The more efficient strategy is to design the curriculum to the skills and abilities of the lowest 20% to 40% of the population. That will, in general, capture the learning propensities of the group as a whole so most of the group will succeed.

Next, it is necessary to be alert to those who are not succeeding, and to screen them if their skills and learning propensities are inconsistent with the assumptions of the curriculum and, if so, to look for the proper intervention to bring those skills and learning propensities into alignment with the instructional assumptions.

That is where "catch-up" programs are most efficiently employed. At the core of these programs – designed to measure students' abilities and skills against the presuppositions of the curriculum design – are learning styles, since they are very often the crux of the mismatch.